

The Impact of Communism on The Dravidian Movements, 1930-40

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An attempt is made in this paper to study how Dravidian ideology was influenced by Communist philosophy, rationalism, radicalism, atheism, socialism and economics. Madras Presidency Association, Self-Respect League, Self-Respect Socialist Party, Justice Party and Dravidar Khazhagam were important Dravidian movements of the period 1930-40. The Dravidian ideology was essentially a product of E.V. Ramaswami Naicker popularly known as 'Periyar', the influence of communism on him and the above movements has to be analysed.

The Political condition of Tamilnadu

The period 1930-40 was surcharged with nationalist movements. When people started to think of an independent India, socially and economically, they found that they were discriminated and divided on various grounds. While educated elite was just trying to understand the modern political concepts and their applicability to Indian context, common people were subjected to various socio, economic and political obsessions. When the question "who should rule India after the British?" arose, the people were divided. The ambitions of Indian political leaders in such power struggle clashed with the interests of common people. According to their perceived ideology, the leaders tried to mobilise masses

on the basis of emotional and sensitive issues to achieve political goals. Thus, in Madras State the 'caste politics' arose with anti-Brahminic tendencies. With all their internal differences, to some extent, the non-Brahmin movements had some specific common ideologies. E. V. Ramaswami Naicker played an important role in bringing such like minded ideologists together.

EVR's Foreign Tour

EVR left India on December 13, 1931 along with his colleagues S. Ramanathan, secretary of the Self-Respect movement and Erode Ramu on a tour of Russia and other European countries. EVR utilised this tour to his best by studying western and particularly Communist principles and systems wherever he went. They became members of the Rationalist Press Association of London. After going through their publications, they decided to subscribe, as the material could be used in the Indian context. Accordingly, they made arrangements with the Association to send their publications to India. To understand labour problems, they had also met some labour leaders in London.

At Berlin, they visited several socialist and communist organisations and tried to study the revolutionary movements. An interesting episode may be mentioned here about

their visit to Nudist Societies. By joining with other nudist members, they even posed for photographs. They interpreted that the practice of nudism might help them in their pursuit of self-respect ideology, perhaps leading to self-realisation of social-justice, just like some God-believing ascetics, who also adapt and adopt similar methods. In any case, it is not at all new for Dravidian ideologists, as even today it is not uncommon for them to perform antics like feasting before fasting religious groups, carrying re-filled pots and fire-walking to prove their atheism against theism and so on. It was reported that even after their return to India, they not only did not feel shy about their nudist experiments, but also allowed their photographs to be published.¹

Then, they reached the erstwhile USSR and stayed there for three months. They met the then Soviet President, Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin. They were very much impressed by the Russian people, society and institutions based on socialism and communism. Their visit to various schools, scientific institutions, art centres, factories and collective farms in different cities created an indelible impression about egalitarianism and communism in their minds. However, it is very evident that it was EVR, who was more influenced by the communist ideology than his colleagues. Infact, S. Ramanathan openly expressed his opinion that Soviet Communism would not be suitable to Indian soil, because of entirely different socio-economic and religio-political conditions.² But, EVR was very much impressed by the socialist and communist philosophy and he decided to apply the system to Tamil society. It will not be an exaggeration to mention that the three months stay at USSR made EVR to adapt and adopt the communist ideology as part of his programme, directly or indirectly for three decades, in spite of several political compulsions and restrictions.

In Moscow, attending May day celebrations, EVR spoke about the condition of the oppressed and suppressed classes of India. After having several meetings with communist colleagues, he was even prepared to apply for the citizenship for USSR. But, it was reported that it did not materialise, because of political reasons.³ However, he and his colleagues became members of Anti-religious propaganda Association in Moscow.

Differences with S. Ramanathan

Reference has already been made about Ramanathan's reservation on the application of communist ideology in the Indian context, but EVR had decided to adopt it totally for his self-respect and Dravidian ideology. When EVR started changing the propaganda of self-respect movement on the lines of communism, S. Ramanathan expressed his disagreement. Another controversy had also created a wedge between them. That was the incidence of EVR leaving S. Ramanathan at Marsailles without any money. When EVR returned to Madras on November 11, 1932, S. Ramanathan's absence was explained away that he would return after visiting Geneva. But, the letter of S. Ramanathan addressed to J.S. Kannappan proved the fact.⁴ This resulted in some sort of personality clash and ideological difference between the President (EVR) and secretary of the movement. S. Ramanathan, who had quit the Congress in 1925 to follow EVR into self-respect movement rejoined Congress in 1936 to contest elections as candidate from Tanjore. Later, he became a minister in Rajaji's cabinet. To find an alternative, EVR had to collaborate with M. Singaravelu. Therefore, a general body was convened on 28-29 December, 1932. After deliberations, it was decided to form Self-Respect League and Self-Respect Samadharma Party (Self-Respect Socialist Party) of South India with an intention to enter politics. A catholic mouth-piece journal

'King's Rally' apprehending the intrusion of atheist and communist principles under the guise of socialism, dubbed it as "an obsequious copy of Soviet Communism".⁵ The first objective of the pre-amble of the 'Erode programme' was very clear in advocating not only freedom from the British, but also from the other so called capitalist forms of government.⁶ It proposed the change of all native states into one common Indian Federation. The above two points are indications how communist principles were adopted with political orientation and differing from the nationalist ideology of majority of Indians at that time. Though the resolution for such a move was opposed by S. Ramanathan, S. S. Chidambaram and others, it was accepted with a majority.⁷

'Dravidian' press and Communism

The Dravidian periodicals 'Samadharmam (Communism), 'Puratchi' (Revolution), 'Tamizhan (Tamilian), 'Paguttarivu' (Rational Wisdom) and 'Vedigundu' (Bomb) started propagating communist ideology with the atheist dosage of anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindu attacks. A biography of Lenin was translated and serialised in 'Communist', Kudi Arasu reacted in a curious manner by giving much importance to the imprisonment of two British engineers in Russia.⁸ This kind of pro-Russian campaign was coupled with anti-capitalist writings. EVR openly aired his views about capitalism tagging with Britishers and justified its eradication from India.⁹ With the help of the labour leader, M. Singaravelu, the campaign was accelerated towards other walks of life of Tamilnadu. A. Rathinasabapathy and A. Raghavan also joined the suit. Singaravelu's 'Kadavulum, prapanchamum' (God and Universe) and 'Vinjana Muraiyum (Scientific method and ignorant beliefs) show how his writings were utilised successfully for both communism and atheism.

The above Tamil journals in 1933 continuously published articles on Russia and projected that it was the number one egalitarian state on the earth. According to 'Tamilan', "Russia stood foremost amongst the nations of the world in industry and all other fields. The reasons for such progress was communism. Russian Revolution of 1917, life of Karl Marx, principles of communism and other connected articles were regular features. Parallels were drawn and suggestions made as to how communism and 'Self-Respect' concepts could be effectively used to achieve the expected goals. In 1934-36, a number of booklets were published mostly translated from the communist and atheist propaganda materials.

Communism, Christianity and Self-Respect Movement

In the adoption process of communism in the agenda of Self-Respect movement, a new turn took place, as in such a process, the self-respecters had to face with the opposition of Christians. The Rationalist Book Publishing Society, part of the movement, had its headquarters at Erode. As it received the publications from the Rationalist Press Association of London, they were translated into Tamil and distributed at low prices. Initially, some of them were against the concepts and tenets of Christianity, which included "God why I became a Sceptic?" by Ingersoll, the famous American atheist; "Has Religion made any contribution to Civilization?" by Bertrand Russell; "Is there Life after Death?" by Joseph McCabe; "The Celebacy of Priests" by Rev. G. Townsend Fox of Durham; "Women and the Confessional" and "Death will" of Jean Meslier, a Catholic priest. They were under the impression that by opposing Christianity, capitalism could be countered paving way for communism. But, the Christians exposed their motive. The Catholic journal

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'King's Rally' openly countered their propaganda and reacted against EVR's statement made on March 6, 1935, which purported to explain the objectives of the movement. It asserted that EVR was trying to throw a veil over the Godless and Communist activities of the self-respect movement.¹⁰ The self-respecters were also accused of having a share in the 50 lakhs of rupees annually spent on India by Moscow. Though A. Raghavan, a leading member of Self-Respect movement and K.A.P. Viswanathan, secretary of Justice Party later denied that they were red propagandists, the Dravidian press continued to propagate communism. The Christians not only lodged a protest against the publications, but also brought their activities to the notice of Pope Pius XI in Vatican. On December 30, 1933, EVR was arrested along with his sister E.V. Kannammal who was the editor of 'Puratchi' registering a case against him under Section 124-A of the Indian Penal Code for alleged Communist propaganda and sedition. He was convicted for sedition and sentenced to undergo nine months imprisonment and pay a fine of Rs. 300/-. He was released on May 15, 1934. Eugene F. Irschick points out that EVR 'was forced to back away from much of his socialist orientation because of government pressure'.¹¹ But, in fact, he continued to carry on his tirade against Hinduism, instead of Christianity with the dosage of communism till his death.¹²

Self-Respect, Self-Determination and Separatism

To what extent the communist ideology had affected EVR and his movement can be noticed from the metamorphosis of the movement during the period 1930-40. EVR not only participated in the May day celebrations in Russia, when he was there in 1932, but also appealed to the Self-Respecters to celebrate it by organising youth

rallies and public meetings. As EVR was thoroughly imbibed with communism, it is evident that he was aware of the communist view about nation, state and other political concepts. If one closely analyses the meaning and evolution of the expressions 'Self-Respect' and 'Self-Determination', the close relation can easily be found. Lenin in his works clearly pointed out in 1916 about the 'socialist revolution and the right to nations to self-determination', which were under the suppression and oppression of capitalist countries. In fact, such ideas were found not only in the speeches and writings of EVR and his followers but also in their organisational documents. For example, a pamphlet issued by the Self-Respect League mentions about "different nationalities" of India. The Erode programme recommends about the "change of all Native States into one common Indian Federation under the rule of the workers and peasants of India". Certain factors like language, race, culture, heritage etc, were highlighted to justify the claim of the Tamilians for separate nationhood. But, however when communism was banned in July, 1934, EVR, though he was a staunch leftist oriented ideologist suddenly declared that "his party was no communist-oriented, but common-oriented". Many of the Self-Respecters also disowned their communist cloak, his critics described that "he was combination of so many contradictory ideologies".¹³

Though, he openly disowned communism, because of political compulsions, he continued to have the cherished ideology. In deed, in December, 1938, he made the demand for 'Dravidastan' during the Justice party conference held at Madras. C.N. Annadurai explained in detail about this in his controversial book, 'Aryan Myth'.¹⁴ According to him the demand for Dravidastan was not the echo of Pakistan, but it was the other way, as the demand for

Pakistan was made in Lahore on March 22, 1940, whereas this demand was made in 1938. EVR found common cause with the Muslims. A joint Dravida-Islamic army was formed to oppose the British and the Aryans. EVR also proclaimed in the Kovai conference that the Dravidians might live under the rule of Pakistan, but not with Aryans. After becoming the president of the Justice party, presiding over the Justice Confederation held at Tiruvarur in August, 1940 he stressed that, "...for the liberty and freedom of Dravidians, they had to undertake the important work of separating the Dravida country from the rest of India." A resolution was also passed to that effect.¹⁵

S. Sarawati¹⁶ and Louis Dumont¹⁷ have opined that the resolution was the starting point of the Dravidian secessionist movement which began about the same time when the 'two-nation' theory was formulated by the Muslims on the basis of 'their language, religion and culture'. Here, it may be mentioned that the separatist demand made on the lines of race, language, religion, culture and other factors also coincided with the communist propaganda about self-determination, nationhood, nation-state, and other hypotheses and theories. Lenin clearly propounded that the right of self-determination was always linked with the right to secede. Therefore, the Dravidian theoreticians and ideologists not only propagated the idea that 'Tamilagam' was a

separate nation, but also over-emphasised that Dravidians were a separate race with a distinctive language entirely different from 'Aryan race'. This motivated structural change from caste to ethnicity in the south Indian politics has also been pointed out by M.R. Banett, S.A. Banet and others.¹⁸ EVR met Sir Stafford Cripps and put forward the demand of Dravidanad in 1939.

Conclusion:

From the foregoing discussion, a picture is obtained about the political condition of Tamilnadu during 1930-40, where the formation of caste based organisation leading to caste politics, linguistic based agitations leading to regionalism and litenic or racial movements leading to separatism, because of the adoption and mixing of communist and western political concepts. By taking the sensitive and emotional issues that would easily arouse the passions of Common people, autonomist, linguistic, anti-immigrant religious, tribal and irredentist movements, work for their respective motivated goals. But, the responsible leaders of such movements should see that they do not go out of control, as people are involved. Considering the national interest, they should also be careful in restricting the over-enthusiastic and over-zealous groups, so that their demands would not ultimately question the integrity and sovereignty of India.

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